

Interpretive Signs

This help sheet outlines some basics of preparing content for interpretive signs that highlight a place, person or event of historical interest. For planning museum displays please see the help sheet *Display Development and Design*.

What is interpretive signage?

Interpretive signs provide explanation (historical context) for the events, subjects or sites that they highlight. They differ from place markers by combining a clear theme with good research to tell an interesting and meaningful story.

Effective interpretive signs:

- are well-designed and attractive to look at
- have clear and concise content (words and images)
- have a clearly identifiable key message

Planning Sign Content

Key messages

Key messages state what particular aspect of a topic or theme the interpretive sign will cover. A key message (or 'take home' message) is what you want people to remember from reading the sign. Key messages don't appear on a sign (though they may be reflected in titles), but it is useful to have them written down as a reference point for planning sign content.

For any topic there will usually be much more material available than can realistically be used as sign content. Key messages guide decision making about what to include and what to leave out. For example:

- 1 Topic: The grain trade
Key message: This town was a major port for exporting grain.
- 2 Topic: Institute Building
Key message: People have been learning and socialising here for more than 100 years.
OR Wealth from mining built this place

OR From the time it was planned, this building had a chequered history

A group of signs may share a key message or each sign may have its own key message related to the topic. In example 2 above, the Institute Building could be interpreted with three signs, each with a different key message.

Using Images

Use images to highlight aspects of the text and provide another layer to the interpretation. Selection of images is integral to planning sign content.

Images could be photographs, other graphics such as maps, drawings or cartoons, or images of objects. The source of images should be acknowledged.

Writing Tips

Concise and clear: Use short sentences, familiar words and avoid jargon. When it is necessary to include unfamiliar words, explain what they mean. Aim for text that is engaging, clear and easy to read and comprehend.

Use active rather than passive voice: Active voice is more direct and has more impact. Instead of *The town changed as a result of the bushfire* say *The bushfire changed the town.*

Catchy Titles: Use catchy titles on panel headings to grab attention. Use titles to break-up longer sections of text into manageable chunks for the reader.

Audience: Use language and style that is accessible and understandable for all manner of audiences.

Direct and emotive: Get to the point. Make sure the first sentence in a paragraph is important or dramatic. Use simple sentences without too many qualifying phrases. Read text aloud to see how it 'sounds'. Instead of: *The town, due to the drought, which had continued for many years in this region, slowly reduced in its population.* Try a shorter, more vivid style: *The drought continued. The population slipped away with each scorching year...* Balance being creative, with using shorter, more familiar words. Rather than saying *Nevertheless the magnitude of the undertaking precluded it being completed swiftly...* Say it more simply: *The size of the project meant it took time to complete.*

Interactivity and posing questions: Ask questions and tell stories that provoke a *how would you feel if this happened to you* response.

Positive rather than negative: Focus on the positive rather than saying *Don't use the negative.* For example: Instead of: *This kind of dust storm was not new to the town* say *The town had survived many other storms like this.*

Respect and sensitivity: Text should be friendly and conversational. Use acceptable, non-derogatory language and expressions. Consider double meanings and implications.

Control and choice: Influence what is read with clever use of titles and by using text to direct readers to move on to the bit you would like them to read next.

Captions: Use captions to tell more of the story, not just to state what people can see. Consider what 'main text' could instead be turned into image captions. Restrict captions for images/other graphics to 20 – 30 words.

Editing: Edit, edit and edit again to gradually shorten and shape text. It is very useful to have someone unfamiliar with the content of the sign to be involved in the editing process.

Graphic design

Graphic design is the way in which the content of the sign is arranged including:

- layout of text and illustrations
- choice of fonts for text and titles
- the use of colour and contrast
- design and placement of signs and item labels
- the size of images and other graphics

Design needs to consider where the sign will be placed and how far people will be away from it when viewing it. Reproduction quality, font style and sizes, and use of white space (blank areas around text and images, including a border area) are important to the look and feel of a sign and its effectiveness.

A little advice on fonts

Make sure that the font and text size you choose is easy to read. Text should be readable as people approach the sign.

Body text should be between **24** and **36** points.

Headings between **48** and **72** points.

Titles **72** to **96** points.

Captions for illustrations between **18** and **24** points.

AVOID USING ALL CAPITALS BECAUSE IT IS HARDER TO READ

Use italics sparingly for the same reason

Use *cursive*, *decorative* or *unusual* fonts only occasionally for drawing attention to a title or to create a particular effect.